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ABSTRACT

For many years researchers have investigated the relationship between alcohol consumption and human aggression. A "policy-capturing" methodology was used to determine how judgments of responsibility for aggressive behavior are influenced by information about a person's alcohol consumption, sex, and degree of injury to a victim. Male subjects (N=8) read descriptions of an argument in which one person was shoved to the floor by an aggressor. Each subject read 24 descriptions with variations in the extent of injury, the sex of participants, and the amount of alcohol consumed by the aggressor. For each description, subjects rated the aggressor's responsibility, the internal-external causality of his actions, and the length of time he should spend in jail. Large individual differences were found, indicating a wide variance in judgment policies. Alcohol consumption was the primary determinant of judgments of responsibility and causality, but the utilization of information varied greatly. Judgments of sentence length were determined primarily by injury. Only a few subjects supported the notion that drunken aggression is excusable. Half of the subjects judged the aggressor to be more responsible as alcohol consumption rose; over half of the subjects judged the aggressor's behavior to be more internal as alcohol consumption rose. (NRB)

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Information About Alcohol Consumption as a Determinant of Responsibility Attributions

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Information about Alcohol Consumption as a Determinant of Responsibility Attributions

For many years alcohol researchers have investigated the relationship between alcohol consumption and human aggression. Much of this research was stimulated by early correlational studies (e.g., Shupe, 1954; Wolfgang & Strohm, 1956), which suggested that there was a relationship between alcohol intoxication and violent crime. More recent evidence indicates that increased aggression following alcohol consumption may not be due to the effects of alcohol per se, but rather to psychological factors such as norms or expectancies about drunken comportment. McAndrew and Edgerton (1969) found evidence that violent drunken behavior, which is common in Western cultures, is extremely rare in many non-western cutlures. If alcohol's effects on aggressiveness are entirely physiological, one would expect similar behavioral patterns in different cultures. The fact that there are a wide variety of behavioral patterns following alcohol consumption suggests that social and psychological factors are also important.

Several laboratory studies have found that increased aggressiveness following alcohol consumption is related to psychological (expectancy) factors. Lang, Goecker, Adesso, and Marlatt (1975), using a Buss-type aggression machine, attempted to discriminate between psychological and physiological effects of alcohol by employing a placebo manipulation. The experimenters found evidence indicating that dosage expectancy rather than actual dosage was responsible for the increase in aggression

that was found. Those subjects who believed that they had consumed alcohol delivered shocks of significantly greater intensity and duration than those who believed that they had not, regardless of the actual beverage content. Additional evidence for the operation of expectancy factors was reported in a study by Kreutzer and Schneider (1979). A dosage expectancy manipulation was used in which two groups of subjects receiving identical dosages of alcohol were told that they were receiving beer that was either twice as strong or half as strong as conventional beer. Subjects believing they had consumed a doubly potent beverage exhibited significantly more aggression following alcohol consumption.

Such data have led many authors to suggest that a particular set of norms exist in our society concerning drunken behavior. For example, Sobell and Sobell (1973) state that,

> Alcohol intoxication is socially accepted as an excuse for engaging in certain otherwise inappropriate behaviors, such as extremes of flirtation, extremes of aggression, or homosexuality, which are generally considered socially unacceptable when engaged in by a sober individual, but are tolerated from a person who is drunk. (p. 51).

McAndrew and Edgerton (1969) argue that drunken comportment is a "time-out," a socially pre-arranged period of time in which the individual's behavior is permitted to differ from the norm. Bandura (1973) suggests that alcohol may serve as an informative cue, aiding the individual in determining the probable outcome of his behavior, and signifing that violent or uninhibited behavior is permissible.

This view--that drunken aggressive behavior is seen as excusable--has been subjected to surprisingly little direct investigation. The primary purpose of this study was to determine how judgments of responsibility for aggressive behavior are influenced by information about a target person's alcohol consumption, sex, and the degree of injury inflicted on a victim.

In order to answer these questions a "policy capturing" methodology was employed. This technique has been used extensively in attribution and human judgment research (e.g., Arkkelin, Oakley, & Mynatt, 1979; Kaplan & Schwartz, 1975) and allows for a quantitative determination of the degree to which informational cues are weighted by judges in the process of decision-making (Darlington, 1968). The basic paradigm for these investigations has been Brunswik's (1952) lens model (see Hammond, Stewart, Brehmer, & Steinmann, 1975). In a typical case, subjects are presented with a number of cues and asked to make a series of judgments based on the variations in cue values. Utilization of multiple regression techniques allows for a "capturing" of each judge's policy, that is, how each cue is weighted and integrated in the judgment process.

Method

Subjects

Eight male undergraduates were given descriptions of an argument in a bar which resulted in one person (P1) being shoved to the floor by another person (P2).

Procedure

Each subject received several descriptions of the incident with variations in three categories of information presented: injury (slight,

moderate, or severe); sex of both participants (male, female); and amount of alcohol consumed by P2 (none, two beers, four beers, eight beers). Each subject received all possible combinations for a total of 24 (3 x 2 x 4) different descriptions. After reading each description, subjects were asked to rate: (1) the degree to which P2 was responsible for the incident; (2) the extent to which P2's actions were due to either internal or external factors; (3) the number of months in jail to which P2 should be sentenced, assuming that he/she was convicted of assault.

Results

Data were analyzed using multiple linear regression. The information in each description was used to predict each subject's response on the three dependent measures. Since the information was uncorrelated across descriptions, the beta-weights in the regression equations correspond to the unique proportion of variance contributed by each category of information (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

The majority of the variance in subjects' judgments of responsibility (dependent measure #1) was related to information about alcohol consumption. All eight subjects had a significant amount of variance in their responses related to this factor. For only three subjects was injury a significant factor in their judgment of responsibility, and sex was a significant factor for only one subject.

Alcohol consumption was also the primary determinant of judgments of internal vs. external causality (dependent measure #2). Seven of the eight subjects utilized this factor to a significant degree. Injury and sex were significant factors for only one subject each.

Judgments of sentence length (dependent measure #3) were primarily determined by injury. All eight subjects significantly utilized this cue. Alcohol consumption was a significant factor in the judgments of three subjects, and sex a significant factor for one subject.

Inspection of the signs of the beta-weights in the regression equations provided information about the direction of the relationships between the cues and the responses (i.e., the direction of the correlation between the cues and the responses). The most interesting results are those concerning alcohol consumption and judgments of responsibility and internal-external causality. For responsibility judgments, four of the eight correlations are positive, indicating that as alcohol consumption went up, P2 was judged more responsible for his/her actions. The other four correlations were negative, indicating that as alcohol consumption went up, P2 was judged less responsible. For internal-external causality judgments, two of seven correlations were positive, indicating that as alcohol consumption went up P2's actions were judged as more externally caused. The other five correlations were negative, indicating that as alcohol consumption went up, P2's actions were judged as more internally caused. This may suggest that the more an individual drinks the more likely he will be judged as the instigator of a fight.

As expected, all eight correlations between injury and sentence length were positive--more injury produced longer sentence judgments. One subject (#4) judged males as generally more responsible than females, and another (#3) judged females more responsible than males. One subject (#8) judged males' behavior as more externally caused, and one subject (#4 again) judged females behavior as more externally caused.

Discussion and Conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn from these results. First, there were large individual differences. Only on the question of sentence length did all the subjects respond in generally the same way, and even here, there were large differences in the extent to which the dominant cue (injury) was utilized. Nearly all subjects employed information about alcohol consumption in making their judgments about responsibility and causality, but the way in which the information was utilized varied greatly. These individual differences do not represent unreliable or random responding. The overall predictability of the subjects' judgments is quite high. Rather, they indicate widely differing judgment policies.

Second, it is interesting to note that judgments of responsibility were based on different information than judgments of sanction (sentence length). The primary determinant of responsibility judgments was the amount of alcohol consumed, whereas the primary determinant of sanction judgments was the degree of injury inflicted. Arkkelin et al. (1979) found a similar pattern of results, suggesting that judgments of sanction and responsibility are made independently.

Third, at best only a minority of the subjects yielded data supportive of the notion that drunken aggression is excusable. Half judged P2 more responsible when his/her alcohol consumption went up. Over half judged P2's behavior as more internal when alcohol consumption went up. Interestingly, of the three subjects for whom alcohol consumption was a significant factor in their sentence judgments, all three responded with longer sentences as P2's alcohol consumption increased. In no case were shorter sentences given as alcohol consumption went up.

The results of this study suggest that the "policy capturing" methodology is a useful means of assessing how judgments of responsibility for violent drunken behavior are made. Further research should focus on clarifying the nature of these judgments and their relationship to social norms and expectancies.

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Table 1*

Unique Proportions of Variance Accounted for by Each Information Category and Each Response Measure

Subject #	Response Measures**	Information Category: Injury	Sex	Alcohol Consumption
1	(1)	.06		.57
	(2)			.73(-)
	(3)	.17		.30
2	(1)			.68
	(2)			.38(-)
	(3)	.24		.40
3	(1)	.09	.09(-)	.59
	(2)	.14(-)		.12
	(3)	.36		.09
4	(1)		.05	.65(-)
	(2)		.31(-)	.39
	(3)	.56	.06	
5	(1)			.51
	(2)			.87(-)
	(3)	.51		
6	(1)	.17		.12(-)
	(2)			.78(-)
	(3)	.73		
7	(1)			.45(-)
	(2)			.56(-)
	(3)	.48		
8	(1)			.79(-)
	(2)		.35	
	(3)	.65		

*Entries are for significant ($p \leq .05$) proportions of variance only. A negative correlation between a cue and an associated reponse is indicated by (-) after an entry. Absence of this symbol indicates a positive correlation between cue and response.

**(1) = Responsibility; (2) = Internal-External Causality; (3) = Sentence Length